

Professional Learning Communities

An Overview

Definition

“...A Professional Learning Community is a collaboration of teachers, administrators, parents, and students, who work together to seek out best practices, test them in the classroom, continuously improve processes, and focus on results.”

Rick DuFour, 2002.

Fundamental Assumptions

1. We can make a difference: Our schools can be more effective.
2. Improving our people is the key to improving our schools.
3. Significant school improvement will impact teaching and learning.

The ONE Thing

in a
Professional Learning Community,
“learning” rather than “teaching”
is the fundamental purpose
of your school.

Three Big Ideas

Focus on Learning
Collaboration
Focus on Results

Four Corollary Questions

1. What should students know and be able to do as a result of this course, class, or grade level?
2. How will we know that the students are not learning?
3. How do we respond when students do not learn?
4. How do we respond when students learn more?

Question 1 – What are the essential outcomes that we expect students to learn?

Question 2 – What assessment will we use to determine if the students have learned?

Questions 3 & 4 – How will we intervene when students do not learn or learn more than anticipated?

Six Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

- **Shared mission, vision, values, goals**
What distinguishes a learning community from an ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the staff of the school believes and that govern their actions and behaviors.
- **Collaborative Culture**
Professionals in a learning community work in teams that share a common purpose. They learn from each other and create the momentum that drives improvement. They build within the organization the structure and vehicles that make collaborative work and learning effective and productive.
- **Collective Inquiry**
People in a learning community relentlessly question the status quo, seek new methods of teaching and learning, test the methods, and then reflect on the results.
 - They reflect publicly on their beliefs and challenge each other's beliefs.
 - They share insights and hammer out common meanings.
 - They work jointly to plan and test actions and initiatives.
 - They coordinate their actions, so that the work of each individual contributes to the common effort.
- **Action Orientation / Experimentation**
Members of professional learning communities constantly turn their learning and insights into action. They recognize the importance of engagement and experience in learning and in testing new ideas.
- **Commitment to Continuous Improvement**
Members of a learning organization are not content with the status quo and continually seek ways to bring present reality closer to future ideal. They constantly ask themselves and each other:
 - What is our purpose?
 - What do we hope to achieve?
 - What are our strategies for improving?
 - How will we assess our efforts?
- **Results Orientation**
Professionals in a learning organization recognize that no matter how well-intentioned the efforts, the only valid judgment of improvement is observable and measurable results. Assessment and re-evaluation are the keys to continued improvement.

Adapted from Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998), Professional Learning Communities at Work

Mission, vision, values, and goals is the district/school's core ideology.

"The core ideology clarifies what doesn't change for an organization in an environment of rapid and unpredictable change." *Built to Last* (1997, p.48)

Collaborative teams are the engine of a Professional Learning Community. Professionals in a learning community work on interdependent teams that share a common purpose. They learn from each other and create the momentum that drives school improvement.

Collective inquiry, action orientation and experimentation, commitment to continuous improvement, and results orientation are the four habits of highly effective teams.

Adapted from Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998), Professional Learning Communities at Work

Professional Learning Communities at Work

Each word of the phrase “professional learning community” has been chosen purposefully. A “professional” is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. The knowledge base of education has expanded dramatically in the past quarter century, both in terms of research and in terms of the articulation of recommended standards for the profession. Although many school personnel are unaware of or are inattentive to emerging research and standards, educators in a professional learning community make these findings the basis of their collaborative investigation of how they can better achieve their goals.

“Learning” suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. In Chinese, the term “learning” is represented by two characters: the first means “to study”, and the second means “to practice constantly.” Many schools operate as though their personnel know everything they will ever need to know the day they enter the profession. The school that operates as a professional *learning* community recognizes that its members must engage in the ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement.

Much has been written about learning organizations, but we prefer the term “community.” An organization has been defined both as an “administrative and functional structure” (*Webster’s Dictionary*) and as “a systematic arrangement for a definite purpose” (*Oxford Dictionary*). In each case, the emphasis is on structure and efficiency. In contrast, however, the term “community” suggests a group linked by common interests. As Corrine McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson (1994) write:

Community means different things to different people. To some it is a safe haven where survival is assured through mutual cooperation. To others, it is a place of emotional support, with deep sharing and bonding with close friends. Some see community as an intense crucible for personal growth. For others, it is simply a place to pioneer their dreams.

In a professional learning community, all of these characteristics are evident. Educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone.

Adapted from Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998), Professional Learning Communities at Work